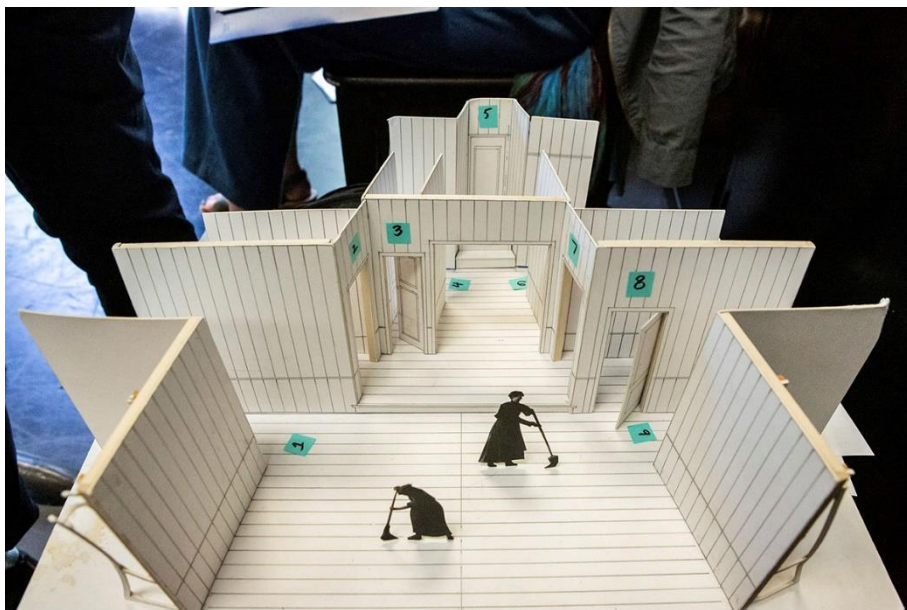


REVIEW OF *EVELYN BROWN (A DIARY)*.  
CONCEIVED AND ORIGINALLY DIRECTED  
BY MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS, DIRECTED BY  
ALICE REAGAN. THE DOWNSTAIRS, LA  
MAMA, NYC, May 19–June 4, 2023

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Daniel Eastman's mockup for the La MaMa production (2023).  
Photo: Hunter Canning.

A sparse home interior, pine wood floors and walls, a labyrinthine stage design with slanted corridors converging onto a central space ... and doors, many, many doors. Such was the stage of the second production of María Irene Fornés' *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)*, which ran at La MaMa from May 19 to June 4, 2023, forty-three years after its premiere, which was directed by Fornés herself and staged at another off-off-Broadway venue, Theater for the New City. In this new production, directed by Alice Reagan, both Ellen Lauren (Evelyn) and Violeta Picallo (Evelyn Brown) incarnate Evelyn Brown, a servant working in rural New England at the beginning of the twentieth century. They enact a life systematically recorded in a diary filled with a tedious litany of monotonous entries that preclude the feelings or emotions of its writer. This diary was the inspiration behind Fornés' play, the only one in her career whose text came "entirely from a found object" (*Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* 3).

Date, weather, chores, visits and interactions with neighbors, activities such as tending babies, cleaning, cooking, running errands to the post office, with seldom a reference to feeling ill or experiencing fatigue.... Such is the structure of each diary entry. Every day is exactly the same as the previous one and identical to the ensuing one. When both actors take turns reciting some of these entries, which date from January to April, they replicate the tedium and the repetitive monotony of daily homemaking and caretaking chores. In the final part of this exchange, their strange, convoluted movements and strained positions on top of a table as they speak reveal the toll of their mundane routines and their silenced, invisible, and secondary lives confined to domestic enclosure. As the production's dramaturg Gwendolyn Alker explains, "The diary is in their bodies" (*Evelyn Brown Talkback* 39'50"). Even rendering the diary in two different voices by different actors cannot palliate the dreariness that is underscored by the fact that parts of Evelyn's speech are pre-recorded, as the audience discovers at the end of this scene.



Evelyn (Ellen Lauren) and Evelyn Brown (Violeta Picayo). Photo: Steven Pisano.

They move endlessly in and out, opening and closing doors, walking across the room and through corridors, which are always closed-off, save for one moment when Evelyn Brown opens the door upper-center stage and a strange beam of light floods the stage. The light draws the other Evelyn towards it in a short, beautiful, poetic moment when both simply stare into the glow and become subdued by the external light. There is also a moment when they dance to polka music, turning and turning around in a happy, if maddening, respite. And they prepare bread: while reciting the recipe, they knead the dough in a very physical gesture that consumes theatrical time. In all of this, we are shown enactment, not representation, a very fornesian strategy of having real action take place during the performance. As a playwright and director, Fornes often gave precedence to image over text, as Scott Cummings writes:

For Fornes, life itself is so precious that her theater, in effect, wants to prolong life by slowing down time and zeroing in on stillness. Her plays are not concerned with the forward thrust of a narrative action or the strategic rush of a character towards some prized goal. (Cummings xxi)

Action replaces speech, as when the two Evelyns engage in an almost maniacal pas de deux of table-setting, bringing in tables of different sizes, moving them, covering them with a tablecloth, placing dishes and changing them from one table to another, and cluttering the stage with objects that multiply to a paroxysm the routine of everyday nourishment.

It is not a dialogue but a theatrical *gestus* that places both Evelyns center stage, again in recognizable Fornés style. The older Evelyn is more introspective, stern and tired; the younger Evelyn Brown brandishes a strange, broad smile and faces the audience, even staring at them. The first time we see them on stage, they have their eyes covered with a piece of cloth; afterwards, Evelyn will blindfold her eyes again in front of the audience. Now, the *gestus* implies the invisibility of her own life as a maid: it is the world that does not see her, despite her constant presence in different homes and her consistent recording of her daily life. To remediate this invisibility, Fornés chose to place her and her voice center stage and this is what it is again offered to us today.

Director Alice Reagan has done a superb job with the two roles of Evelyn and Evelyn Brown. The actors' performances combine in an elegant, subdued style with moments of intense physicality and energetic movement that evolve into a frenzy. Even though the Evelyns rarely interact and never speak to each other, Reagan has them carry out actions together on stage that are synchronized, almost as if they were dancing.

Donald Eastman's set for the original *Evelyn Brown* marked the beginning of his three decades of collaboration with Fornés (*Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* 5), and he was again responsible for the set design on this momentous occasion. It is a spare set that simultaneously allows for the simplicity of a farmhouse interior and—thanks to the corridors and doors that multiply the sense of space—the complexity of a larger house represented by the intricate movements of just two characters.

The play's rhythm changes throughout as the actors' movement and repetition give way to stillness. Jordan Rose Bernstein's sound design integrates sound, music and speech, alternating it with silence. Christina Watanabe's light design punctuates the mood of different stage actions with varying intensity, providing a counterpoint to Evelyn Brown's life. And Gabriel Berry, former resident costume designer at La MaMa who "was privileged to

work with María Irene Fornés on numerous projects” (*Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* 5), designed the costumes of both Evelyns in this production.



Evelyn (Ellen Lauren) and Evelyn Brown (Violeta Picayo). Photo: Steven Pisano.

This was a rare, almost miraculous occasion to see *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* on stage. Gwendolyn Alker’s will and determination brought this performance to light, having persevered for five long years in her intention to stage a play whose script was not available in print. Alker carried out meticulous archival research and contacted people who had been involved, as participants or spectators, in the original *Evelyn Brown* production, among them the original cast members Aileen Passlof and Margaret Harrington (*Evelyn Brown Talkback* 2’05”), as well as set and costume designers Eastman and Berry, who had worked with Fornés on other plays. Scott Cummings and Bonnie Marranca, leading Fornés’ critics, were also essential in providing insights and helping to bring this project to fruition. In the process, the dramaturg and director recovered a long-lost version of the script that they could use for this performance.

The choice of La Mama as the venue was most felicitous because it is the only off-off-Broadway theater from the ebullient

1960s scene that is still running. Let us not forget that this is the milieu where Fornés first began her involvement with theater and never abandoned it in her four decade-long career. To accompany and record this endeavor, the hall at The Downstairs mounted an exhibition explaining the process of recuperating Fornés “only play exclusively based on one single text” and emphasizing some fundamental aspects of her dramaturgy (*Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* 3). As Alker explains in the playbill, Fornés received the handwritten diary of Evelyn Brown as a gift, and she respected the role of Evelyn Brown as a writer so much that Fornés decided to name the original production an adaptation, “leaving herself as director, and the two actors as co-collaborators with the long-lost Evelyn Brown” (*Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* 3). Consequently, Evelyn Brown becomes the playwright of her own life, and her presence on stage reclaims the dignity of her and a thousand other unsung and invisible lives.

A round of applause for this unique representation as it recovers and celebrates the legacy of Fornés’ life in the theater.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank and acknowledge Gwendolyn Alker and Alice Reagan, who kindly provided the photographs (with credits) to be included in this review.